



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**THE USE OF TAG QUESTIONS IN THE
ACADEMIC CONTEXT**

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ACADEMIC CONTEXT**

By

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January 2002

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According to Lakoff (1975), tag questions are a feature of what she calls “women’s language” and that women use them more than men. However studies conducted as a result of her claim show inconsistent findings. Many authorities on the subject such as Holmes (1984, 1995), Coates and Cameron (1989), Dubois and Crouch (1975) are of the opinion that the use of tag questions is dependent on many linguistic and extra-linguistic factors and not merely gender. Studies on the use of tag questions have been conducted in various contexts and situations but not specifically in the academic context at the tertiary level in Malaysia.

In light of the relatively limited information that is available regarding the use of tag questions in the academic context, the nature of the study is descriptive and exploratory. The study adopts a quantitative as well as a qualitative design. The study sample was made up of lecturers and students from the English Departments of Universiti Putra Malaysia, International Islamic University Malaysia and Tunku

Abdul Rahman College. The data was collected by means of questionnaire and audiotape recordings of lectures and oral presentations.

The findings suggest that in the academic arena, both men and women use different forms of tag questions, with women using them slightly or marginally more than men. The most frequently used tag questions are the *comformative*, *responsive* and *information seeking* types, which function to request the agreement of the audience, to invite response from the audience and to express uncertainty respectively. Speakers usually feel that the use of tag questions boosts their level of confidence and creates a congenial atmosphere for interaction to take place. The study also revealed that a single category of question tag could function as different forms of tag questions and vice versa. In the Malaysian academic context the most frequently used linguistic realizations of question tag categories by both genders are *OK* and *all right*.

This study sheds some light on the use of tag questions in the academic context. The findings of this study may help later studies to explore whether the use of tag question is dependent on factors such as different contexts, situations, intentions, cultures and varieties of English.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

PENGUNAAN *TAG QUESTION* DALAM KONTEKS AKADEMIK

Oleh

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Januari 2002

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Menurut Lakoff (1975), *tag question* (would soalan bergilir or berganti be deemed appropriate?) merupakan satu ciri bahasa yang dikaitkan dengan “bahasa kaum wanita.” Kaum wanita lebih kerap menggunakan *tag question* daripada kaum lelaki. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian menunjukkan dapatan yang tidak konsisten. Ramai penyelidik seperti Holmes (1984, 1995), Coates dan Cameron (1989), Dubois dan Crouch (1975) berpendapat bahawa penggunaan *tag question* tidak bergantung kepada ciri-ciri linguistik dan linguistik tambahan (extra-linguistic). Penyelidikan telah dijalankan di dalam pelbagai konteks dan situasi tetapi tidak terdapat kajian yang dijalankan khusus dalam konteks akademik pada tahap pendidikan tinggi di Malaysia.

Oleh kerana maklumat tentang penggunaan *tag question* dalam konteks akademik agak terhad, kajian ini merupakan deskriptif dan *exploratory*. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada

pensyarah dan pelajar dari Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris di Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa dan Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman Data dikumpul melalui soal selidik dan rakaman perbualan biasa yang berlaku dalam kelas siswazah di mana pensyarah menyampaikan syarahan dan pelajar membuat persembahan

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa dalam arena akademik, kedua-dua wanita dan lelaki menggunakan bentuk *tag question* yang berbeza Wanita lebih menggunakannya daripada lelaki Tetapi perbezaan itu hanya sedikit Jenis tag question yang paling kerap digunakan adalah jenis *konformatif*, *responsif* dan yang bertujuan *mencari maklumat*, yang mana fungsinya adalah mendapatkan respon daripada orangramai dan untuk menyampaikan perasaan kurang pasti Penutur biasanya merasakan bahawa penggunaan *tag question* meningkatkan tahap keyakinan mereka dan membentuk atmosfera yang menyenangkan semasa interaksi berlaku Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa setiap kategori *tag question* boleh berfungsi sebagai bentuk *tag question* yang berbeza dan sebaliknya Dalam konteks akademik di Malaysia, *question tag* bercorak jelmaan linguistik yang paling kerap digunakan oleh kedua-dua jantina ialah *OK* dan *all right*

Kajian ini mengutarakan penggunaan tag question dalam konteks akademik Dapatan kajian ini boleh membantu penyelidik lain untuk mengkaji samada penggunaan *tag question* adalah bergantung kepada faktor seperti konteks yang berlainan, situasi, mat, budaya dan laras bahasa yang berbeza

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 2nd January 2002 to conduct the final examination of Muhammed Shahriar Haque on his Master of Arts thesis entitled "The Use of Tag Questions in the Academic Context" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulation 1980. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions, the purpose of the study and the definition of key terms. This section also sets the parameters of the study.

1.1 Background

Language plays a very important role in the society we live in. It is through language that we perceive the world around us and express our thoughts. However, certain ideological assumptions become naturalized in such a way that they become a natural part of our lives. But what lies beneath these ideological assumptions is something that has been overlooked in many ways. When these ideological assumptions are taken for granted they may become oppressive in nature.

In general “language and gender oriented research has associated women with questions in negative ways” (Coates, 1996: 200). Some studies have established the fact that women use more tag questions than men. The ideological assumption for this was and in many cases still is the fact that:

... women are relatively powerless members of our society, and since women use questions more than men, then questions must in some way be powerless forms. This belief is historically linked to Robin Lakoff's famous claim that tag questions that do not seek information are not 'legitimate', and that such questions are typical of women speakers and are an expression of tentativeness (and of femininity), (Coates, 1996: 200).

However, in recent years discourse analysts have proposed that “questions are in fact potentially powerful linguistic forms” and different studies have shown that “powerful speakers, such as magistrates, doctors, teachers, and presenters of TV discussion programmes, use more questions than less powerful speakers” (Coates, 1996: 200).

Elgin (1993: 4) points out that before 1900, for most speakers of American English (especially men), the difference between male and female language could be summarized as follows:

- The language of women, whether spoken or written, was inferior to that of men.
- A woman who was an exception to this rule was a sort of freak, an abnormal organism. Anyone who wanted to compliment her on her speech or writing did so by saying that she spoke or wrote “like a man.”

However, this type of ideology lost ground after 1900 and it became politically incorrect to say such things openly. Then in the 1970s the scenario began to change dramatically. Even though a number of scholars wrote on the issue, it was Robin Lakoff's 1975 paperback (Harper and Row), *Language and Woman's Place*, that really opened the public's eyes. She suggested a list of features (in American Mainstream English), which could identify women's speech from men's. The interesting thing was that Lakoff's list of *linguistic* characteristics could be tested. In the list, she claimed that women generally use more tag questions than men. as a result of which researchers began to investigate the issue. The results were confusing and contradictory: some researchers found that women do use more tag questions

than men; few found no difference in men's and women's use of tag questions; some found men use more tag questions than women (Elgin, 1993: 5).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

According to Lakoff's hypothesis, women by using certain features of what she calls "women's language" not only present themselves as tentative beings but also create an overall image by which their personal identities become submerged. Among the numerous claims she makes is the statement that women use more tag questions than men and by doing so, they project themselves as weak and uncertain. Following Lakoff's claims in *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), a series of studies have been conducted which have yielded inconsistent findings and further studies have revealed that the use of tag questions is dependent on many linguistic and extra-linguistic factors such as context, situation, intention, culture, variety of English, and not merely gender. Apart from these factors, it has become apparent that there is 'no exact correlation between function and form': different lexical forms (of tag questions) are used differently by men and women. The whole process would thus appear to be far more complex than Lakoff had originally comprehended, and cannot be generalized by mere intuition (as she had done) without conducting proper empirical studies.

Above all, the use of tag questions in specific contexts such as the academic context is an issue, which has been for far too long overlooked and under-researched, and which needs to be looked into. Hence, in light of this objective of the research, it is important for us to consider whether the use of tag questions might be inclined to

one gender only. If so, what forms of tag questions are most commonly used and how are they used? Furthermore, it is also important for us to realize the extent to which the speaker feels the use of tag questions affects her or his confidence level in the academic context.

1.3 Research Questions

In light of the above, this study seeks to address the following research questions with specific reference to the academic context:

1. Do women or men use more tag questions?
2. Which types or forms of tag question are most frequently used and what are their functions?
3. To what extent does the speaker feel the use of tag questions affects her or his confidence level?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is not only to test one of Lakoff's claims (See Chapter II, p. 16-17), which is that women use more tag questions than men, but also to determine what types of tag questions are used in the academic context, with regard to form and function.

The study hopes to shed more light on the use of tag questions in the academic context regarding form, function and gender-specific use of tags. It is hoped that this type of study will help to open the minds of people and dispel the common myth of

archetypal stereotypes regarding tag questions and women, and tag questions and low confidence level. Due to the limited information that is available regarding tag question and confidence level in the academic context, the study also hopes to focus on this issue.

1.5 Significance of the Study

One may well ask, “What is the relationship between tag questions and their gender-specific use in the academic context?” In the case of any teaching and learning situation, the question of tag questions is quite relevant. It is very important for us “to learn that the society is changing in its view of women and that speakers from different cultures will have their own sets of values regarding men’s and women’s speech as well as other aspects of social behaviour” (Wolfson, 1989: 183). What is more relevant for us is to acknowledge the significance of these changes and the means by which they are manifested in language.

It is necessary for us to empirically explore the possible use of tag questions in all forms and functions pertaining to all contexts, and not merely confine our ideas to any generalized archetypal stereotypes.

Research in terms of the use of tag questions in the academic context is so limited that it can almost be perceived as negligible; and what is more, is the fact that no significant research, up to date, on this topic has been carried out in the Malaysian context.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

Since no major study on the use of tag question in the academic context in the Malaysian perspective has been done up till now, the study sample and the data collected have been confined to the English departments of various public and private tertiary educational institutions. Later studies can extend beyond the English department to other departments in the same faculty as well as other faculties.

This study has confined its data gathering process to making recordings of lecture delivery and presentations and administering a questionnaire to the study sample. The style in which the English language is used to deliver a lecture and present a topic may have certain criteria that might vary, but for this study they have been categorized under one situation, namely the academic context.

Due to the nature of the study, in the transcriptions, the emphasis has been on tag questions only, rather than any other pragmatic feature; more specifically, on the tag questions used by the subject in question during the lecture or presentation. Language use of the other participants during a lecture or presentation has not been emphasised nor are aspects of non-verbal interaction. Later research can focus more specifically on these aspects.

It is undeniable that by extending the scope of this study the findings will probably be more revealing. However, since the study of this nature is one of the first of its kind in the Malaysian context (as already mentioned) the scope has been confined for the convenience of the research.

Since a non-probability sampling design has been used in the study, the resultant quota sample (see page 43 for an explanation) would appear to have decreased the generalizability of the findings. The findings of this study may not be generalizable to all academic contexts, because the study sample might have certain characteristics that are unique to them and hence may not be truly representative of the academic arena.

When the recordings of the lectures and presentations were made, the subjects were not under the control of the researcher; that is, in order to collect data under natural conditions the researcher did not in any way influence or control the subject matter or restrict the time. However, for the convenience of the research the presentations of some of the students were recorded from the same courses; hence, the recordings tended to be subject biased. Also for the convenience of the research, ten to fifteen minutes of the recording of each subject was transcribed and used as data. The research method is described in further detail in Chapter 3.

In order to avoid distracting the subjects in any manner, the recordings were made from the audience end of the lecture or presentation rather than by attaching a mini-microphone to the subjects. Since the recorder was directed towards the speaker, the voices of others who participated during the lectures or presentations were not always audible. Because of the natural circumstances under which the recordings were made, as opposed to clinical conditions, the quality of the recordings was not always of the same standard. Furthermore, due to the fluctuation in the voice modulation of the presenters, overlapping conversations, external noises and

disturbances (which were beyond the control of the researcher) and normal recording equipments, the quality of some of the recordings were not of the highest standard. As a result, parts of some of the recordings posed problems when transcribing. These issues were resolved by means of short discussions with the co-raters, who along with the categorisation process, the accuracy of the transcriptions also helped to resolve the ambiguities and obscurities in the transcription.

The transcriptions of the recordings (Appendix E and F) provide a rich source of natural data in the academic arena. Other linguistic aspects of academic discourse could be studied from the transcriptions. The transcriptions are an integral part of this thesis as they provided part of the raw data for the research. The necessity of the transcriptions formed the basis of this study because it was from them that the actual use of tag questions in the academic context was observed.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

The study finds it necessary to provide the definitions of certain key terms. The important key terms are defined below.

1.7.1 Tag question

A tag question is a grammatical term for a statement with a question tag added at the end of a declarative statement, turning it into an actual or apparent question (McArthur, 1992). In the present study, all the tag questions were not of the conventional type, and in order to be able understand them entirely from the

perspective they were used, one would actually have had to be present during the context they were used in. Sometimes they were used to address the entire audience and sometimes only a single person in the audience.

1.7.2 Question tag

A question tag is a short question tagged on to the end of a declarative statement (McArthur, 1992). Some question tags are rather unconventional in the sense they have double structure. These double structured question tags reinforce the impact of a single structured question tag.

1.7.3 Academic context

In general, academic context refers to the physical, temporal and psycho-social situations that underlie language use in public and private tertiary educational institutions. Within this study academic context refers to the lecture situations in Universiti Putra Malaysia, International Islamic University Malaysia and Tunku Abdul Rahman College.

1.7.4 Types of tag questions

1.7.4.1 Conformative

Conformative refers to the type or form of tag question that is used to request the agreement of an addressee or the audience. This type of tag question is audience-